DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 728 CS 507 569

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TITLE Icebreakers and Group Builders for the Classroom.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Chicago, IL, April 11-14, 1991).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Class Activities; Classroom Communication; *Group Activities; Group Dynamics; Higher Education; Secondary Education; *Speech Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Strategies

ABSTRACT

Noting that it is important in communication classes to devise ways to help students to be comfortable with each other, this paper maintains that icebreakers and group builders are strategies that are vital in creating openness and trust in such classes. The paper offers eight icebreakers (activities designed to help students feel comfortable with each other, characterized by brevity, relatively low-risk involvement, and participation by all class members) and eight group builders (activities to help students develop a sense of connection and shared focus in a designated group, characterized by an emphasis on one or more group variables). (SR)

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Icebreakers and Group Builders for the Classroom

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As we work with students in our communication classes, it is important for us to devise ways to help them to be comfortable with each other. Icebreakers and group builders are strategies that are vital in creating openness and trust in our classes.

Icebreakers are activities that are designed to help students begin to feel comfortable with each other. They are characterized by brevity, relatively low-risk involvement, and participation by all members in the class. Generally they encourage acquaintance by those who do not know each other. They also create a level of comfort with the class and the notion of experiential learning.

Group Builders are activities that are designed to help students to develop a sense of connection and shared focus in a designated group. They are characterized by an emphasis on one or more group variables: e. g. roles, norms, purposes, processes, leadership, or dynamics. Group builders take longer than icebreakers, and they require more intentional facilitation by the teacher.

Energizers are a third category of strategies that the communication teacher may find useful. Energizers are brief interventions that are designed to help students to "clear their minds," to re-create personal and group energy, or for transition purposes. They are characterized by their brevity, their reliance on physical involvement of participants, and their sense of "fun."

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Sample Icebreakers

From *The Encyclopedia of Icebreakers*:

1. "Strike up the Band": divide the group into sections, assigning an instrument to each. Identify a conductor. Give sections a moment to rehearse, and encourage them to use all communication channels available to them for their portrayals. Have conductor lead the band in playing such selections as "Mary Had a Little Lamb" or "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." You might end with a rendition of your school fight song or a popular number.

2. "Facts." Have each student tear off a length of toilet paper, or help him/herself to candy such as M&M's, or take a handful of paper from a box. Put students into small groups. They must share one fact about themselves for each item they have selected (10 M&M's=10 facts). Variation: specify a context for the facts; make facts relate to class material.

3. "Name Signs." Have each student create a set of body movements to complement his/her name. Have students stand in a circle and beginning with one student, have the student say and do the actions for his/her name, followed by everyone doing it. Then move on to the next student and have the group do the first name/actions and then the second. This continues around the entire circle.

Other Ideas:

1. "School Timeline." ("Hometown Timeline" is another possibility) Have students create a timeline that represents chronological connections to the school (or the hometown). They must identify who was first connected (and encourage them to think creatively about how they first were connected) to the school/town, who was second, third, etc. When the timeline is created, the teacher might travel rapidly through the timeline, asking students to tell when and how they were connected.

2. "Living Map." Set the classroom up as a map of the United States. Identify boundaries and Mississippi River (or Nebraska). Have students place themselves on the map to correspond with (a) where they lived before coming to this town; (b)where they spent their most

fun vacation; (c)where their relatives first lived in America; (d)where they would like to end up living; (e)etc. You may also use just the state of Nebraska rather than the United States for the map.

3. "Class Demographics." Divide the class into dyads or triads. Give each group at least one question to which they are to find the answer based on all members of the class. They are responsible to secure answers, compile results, and report their findings to the rest of the class. Questions/items can be general in nature (What is the birth order of students in this class? What is the favorite music of students in this class? What is the average number of shoes owned by members in this class?) or they can relate directly to the class (What is the level of experience of this class with public speaking? What do members of this class feel are the most significant movies ever made? What do class members see as the major communication problems facing our world today?) At the same time that the students are working on their own question, they are also answering questions from other class members.

4. "Every Community Needs A." Briefly discuss the various roles that are needed in a community. Ask each student to identify the role that he or she would most likely play in a community and why he or she would make this choice. Put students into small groups, or discuss with the class as a whole, what the various roles are that students have selected for themselves and why. Variations: "Every school needs a." would be designed with roles relating to a school. The group can also be assembled and each student can in turn select for a fellow student the role in the community/school he/she would select for that person, and why.

5. "Four Corners." Give students a forced-choice question, relating to class material. Students should go to the corner of the room that represents their choice. Students in each corner will them discuss an assigned question and report to the group. Examples: If you had a free day/night in Washington, D.C., would you choose to go to (a) observe the Congress in session; (b) attend a performance at the Kennedy Center; (c) people-watch at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial; (d) browse at the Library of Congress. The question students in each group might discuss is "What does time spent in recreational pursuits say about a person's value system and self-concept?"

Sample Group Builders

1. "Bag Exercise." Each student is given a brown paper bag and asked to bring it to class with three items inside that are particularly meaningful to him/her. Bags are then distributed to students (no one should have his/her own bag) and each student is asked to examine the items and decide to whom the bag belongs and why. In turn, each person shows the items in the bag he/she examined, and tries to answer questions such as Where is the bag's owner from? What hobbies or interests might he/she have? Is he/she an introvert/extrovert? Does he/she enjoy the outdoors or indoors? What personality clues do the bag's contents give you regarding its owner? Do you know who you bag belongs to?

2. "Felt Togetherness." Each student is given a piece of felt; scissors and glue are available in the classroom. Each student is to create a symbol of his/her role in the group, using some of every student's felt. In turn, each student describes his/her symbol. All symbols can be mounted on a large sheet of felt, and the group collage can be mounted in the classroom.

3. "Expanding Dyads." Students are paired. They are given five minutes to discuss the responses to two items: (1)If you are going to work with me, what you need to know is. . . and (2)If you are going to be my friend, what you need to know is. . . At the end of the sharing time, pairs are combined to create foursomes. Each student is responsible to introduce his/her partner to the other twosome. After this sharing time, foursomes are combined into groups of eight, and students are instructed to introduce someone whom they have not yet introduced. The facilitator should stress that the group has a responsibility to see that everyone is introduced in the brief time that is available. Depending on the size of the class, the groups of eight can be combined into groups of sixteen and the same instructions are repeated. At the end of the exercise, students are asked to stand in a large circle, the facilitator brings each student in turn to the center of the circle and says, "who is this?" and "what do we know about him/her?" Students are encouraged to call out what they have learned. The exercise can end with tying the experience into the task/relationship components of groups.

4. Group energizers. The class is divided into small groups. The teacher explains what an energizer is, and the purposes of energizers. An energizer might be facilitated as an example (playing "toe tag" or singing "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean," either standing up or sitting down each time a word that begins with "b" is sung). The groups are then instructed to develop an energizer that they will facilitate at the beginning of each class over the next several class meetings. Following the conclusion of the energizers, students can meet in the small groups again to discuss the dynamics of their development process, including issues such as who played what roles, how the task got accomplished, what members learned about each other and themselves from the process.

5. "Labeling exercise." Give each class member a mailing label for each member in the class (masking tape can be substituted) and a marker or crayon. The students are asked to write one attribute to describe each group member. One student goes to the front of the room and in turn each student presents his/her label to that student, explaining the label if that is appropriate. When all labels have been given to that student, he/she sits down and another student stands up for the process. When all students have received their labels, they are asked to reflect on what they have received and what this tells them about their role and function in the group. Discussion follows.

6. "Messages." Students are each given a blank sheet of paper and a marker and are asked to write a message which will be "sent" to the rest of the group. The message should express the feelings that the student has experienced from being a group member; students should be warned to avoid "I think" statements that filter and dilute feelings. In turn, students share the messages with other members of the group. This follows with a discussion of what we have discovered about this group from this experience; how did we feel as we were reading our messages; what happened with respect to trust, caring, openness; any other feelings that the group would like to share. (adapted from *Structured Experiences for Group Facilitators*)

7. "Commercials." Divide class into smaller groups. Provide a variety of materials (paper, markers, balloons, straws) on a table. Each group is instructed to use whatever materials they wish to

create a "commercial" for becoming a part of the specific class. After all commercials have been presented, discuss what the commercials had to say about the group norms, roles, purposes, benefits and limitations. Students can also discuss the group dynamics of working on the commercials.

8. "Guided Discussion." Have students sit in a circle and in turn have each student respond to these questions: (1)What memory do you most vividly have from ten years ago? What prediction do you have for what you will be doing 10 years from now? (2)Discuss a skill that you have--something you do really well. Don't just name it--explain it to the rest of the group. (3) Think of something you really, truly enjoy--some might call it a "passion" of yours--discuss it with your group members. (4)Share what your work style is like--how do you go about getting things accomplished? After these responses have been shared, discuss (1)What are your perceptions and feelings about this group? (2)What responses surprised you and why? (3)What do you now know about roles in the group? (4)What was easy and difficult about this exercise? (5)What would you now like to say to the rest of the group?

Resources

Forbess-Greene, Sue (1983) The Encyclopedia of Icebreakers. University Associates, Inc., 8517 Production Avenue, San Diego, CA 92121.

Pfeiffer, J. William and Jones, John J. (Eds.) (1974-1985) Handbook of Structured Experiences For Human Relations Training. San Diego: University Associates (10 vols).

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